

Courtesy of  
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Most dictionaries define happiness, in its primary and everyday use, as simply the feeling of contentment. This definition is not only perfectly acceptable, but also as true and practical a description of the concept as one can have. As far as philosophers and scientists are concerned, however, happiness is a far more complex concept than such a simple definition would imply, and even more complicated when one begins to consider exactly how one achieves and maintains it. My own concern is with the possibility of *perfect* happiness, and not with a general assessment of such a thing, but with practical approaches to actually attaining it. Specifically, I propose that in any given situation or moment, any given person is capable of extracting an ideal amount of happiness from their circumstances, and that by following such moments as one would a trail, a person can lead themselves to more and greater instances of happiness. I base these evolving theories of mine not simply on speculative thought, but also, and most importantly, on how they play out in application. Using myself as a research subject in my own search for a deeper, more consistent, more fulfilling happiness, I feel that I've observed, after an absurd amount of trial and error, promising hints of it.

That a person can scrape a sort of happiness out of just about anything can be illustrated by the accounts of many former prison inmates. Upon initial incarceration, a new inmate naturally experiences the antithesis of happiness when he trades his freedom for an 8-foot by 8-foot prison cell. After a time however, that same inmate will find some way, if not to be fully happy, then to find some sort of functional contentment within his environment. In fact, if the prisoner is in prison long enough, as has many times been attested, he will actually miss the comfort and security of his cell when he is finally released. It has been shown that often many long-term prisoners, once freed, will find themselves committing crimes with the express purpose of returning to the safety of a place that they'd come to call home. This is not much different than the psychology of a beaten woman and her continued love for her abusive husband. In some form or fashion, we will create some semblance of happiness, however perverse, in order to keep ourselves sane. This is because just as in the body there is an urge toward physiological homeostasis there is an urge in the mind toward psychological homeostasis. In both cases the goal is the same: to create the best approximation of ideal internal conditions by changing the mind's or body's relationship to the external conditions in which they exist.

But what of a more perfect homeostasis, a more perfect happiness? What of the sort of continuous, steady-stream of blissful happiness that seems reserved for storybooks and the fantasies of

philosophers and religion? Can an ordinary man create a sense of perfect happiness out of the ordinary elements of an ordinary life? My own hunt for this mythical beast began initially as a matter of what I believed was a practical necessity. When I first entered medical school, I was completely overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information and the speed at which everything seemed to be, to put it frankly, “crammed down our throats.” To someone with a borderline ADD personality, who learns better by free association than by linear mechanics, this situation was almost unbearable. Moreover, I labored under the false assumption that, given my love for the material both practically and philosophically, I should be happy every day in studying it. This seemed logical enough, at least in theory, but was an almost unreasonable condition if, like me, you found your performance almost completely dependent on it. My discontentedness could easily fail me, as several close calls proved, just as a streak of enthusiasm could pass me with flying colors. I clung to this belief, ridiculous at the time, partly because I’m an uncompromising idealist (I would have to be an idealist to even consider something like “perfection” as a practical reality), but partly because of my age. Being in my early thirties and seeing many of my friends already experiencing the fruits of the labors of their previous decade, and generally increasing in happiness, I felt a pressure, and an increasing urgency, to feel the same. In short, I felt my biological clock ticking. My body was already ready to receive these sensations of hard-earned happiness and contentment but my situation was far from delivering it. What I was looking for was happiness now, this very second. I demanded the statement, “It’s not the destination, but the journey that counts,” to be literally true, with means favoring ends, that I might experience the love of labor for labor’s sake as perhaps, and I was being even more idealistic here, the character of Siddhartha had in Hesse’s novel, as my own happy path to enlightenment. It is with these thoughts in mind that I proceeded with my experiment in perfect happiness, with the hopes that not only might I experience such a thing for myself, but also formulate a model that might be of use to others, particularly those earnest individuals with scattered, attention-impaired minds like my own.

Taken at its most simplistic and universal level, happiness consists of a simple paradigm: we set up an expectation, and if we satisfy it, we experience happiness. Even the delight of a happy surprise satisfies the broader, subtler expectations of what we want out of life. According to this paradigm then, perfect happiness would require the perfect satisfaction of our expectations. My method of bringing this experience into existence is ultimately rooted in what I term “perfection of the moment.” By this I mean that at any given moment there is a set of possible actions and/or perceptions that will unveil the potential happiness in that moment, specific for the person experiencing it. In pausing at these moments of choice (and indeed, every moment is a moment of choice) we can be mindful firstly of our

expectations of the moment, both immediate and long-term, and secondly, of the elements of that moment that we have at our disposal. This allows us the possibility of finding hidden opportunities for the satisfaction of our expectations, or, just as importantly, often even more importantly, opportunities for removing unproductive expectations and discovering new ones. In so doing, we can come to better terms with our moment or situation and thus find a better sense of happiness, by way of a more perfect homeostasis, within it. In this formulation then, happiness is the truest sign that the mind has fully allowed itself to take the shape of its circumstance, just as any fluid substance would take the shape of its container. Here, however, the person experiencing it is not just conforming to a situation, but is actively and creatively engaging it, even if the person is simultaneously working to change the future shape of that container.

Ultimately, success in such an approach would be a question not only of the extent of a mind's flexibility, but also its willingness to be flexible in its hunt for happiness. In my own case, after exhausting what I thought were all of my options, and almost to the point of depression, I flung myself on my couch, closed my eyes, and deeply meditated on what it was that I was really expecting of my labors and what it was that was ultimately disappointing me so much in not experiencing it. What I found was that what I wanted most was just to finish on time. I knew from some of my few, better experiences in those six months that if I could only finish a first round of studying fast enough that I could actually get a chance at a second round to review, even if only once more, I was guaranteed to do well enough to be happy. So I did just that. I grabbed my notebooks of observations and theories, tossed them in the closet and simply forced myself, like a self-incarcerated prisoner, to simply sit there for hours on end without moving, eyes glued to my notes. It was excruciating, even to the point of physical pain in my skull, as I realized just how strong my urge was to get up and chase down every shiny thought that flitted through my head. This was, of course, precisely the kind of thing I was trying to avoid and, in fact, didn't even think was possible until I found myself doing it. Each time I pressed myself, I found I could sit and focus just a little longer, and each time very consciously changing my expectation of happiness as I did so. Amazingly, as I exchanged my need for happiness at that very second with happiness each time I finished a proposed goal, I suddenly found myself happy again. In fact, I actually began to fulfill my own original expectation, my unreasonable demand, as I began to derive my moment-by-moment pleasure from my page-by-page sense of completion. Finally, becoming more enthused by my progress, I began to seize upon each successive moment as an opportunity to increase this feeling of accomplishment and, as a result, I found myself going faster, being more efficient and ultimately, feeling ever more happy. I was, and still am, elated by this intrinsic change in perception.

Now, whenever I'm or torn between options, or feel I have no options at all, or worse, when I'm in a state of scattered confusion when I don't even know *what* it is that I want, which can sometimes be very frequently, I stop and perfect the moment.

Such is the conclusion of my first experiment in perfect happiness, begun at first as a matter of survival and now for its own sake, to see just how far and how widely I can take what I've learned about the creation of happiness ex nihilo from the common elements of everyday life. Keeping in mind the very wide range of human experience, most lives, many would agree, consist of a whole lot of humanness punctuated by a few sparkling moments of truly effervescent pleasure. In fact, we've come to accept this to such a degree that we would probably call such a life generally happy. I disagree with this accepted assumption and instead propose that the experience of perfect happiness is a matter mindful consideration and practical application. I do not mean to imply that I have, in six-short months, solved all of life's great mysteries, nor even the mystery of happiness. Rather, I'm suggesting that such a lofty endeavor may well be worth someone's time, that a variety of practical approaches to perfect happiness may very well exist, and that such experiences are within the reach of any person. In one sense, what I've proposed is nothing more than an elaboration on common, though rarely heeded, wisdom, perhaps summed up best by the well-known Chesterton quote, "An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered." What I wish to add to this common wisdom, however, is a practical approach, and the beginning of a practical theory, of one's attainment of such a thing, not simply in an attempt to make inconveniences seem better, but in an attempt to make everything, all of daily life, even ordinary moments, perhaps even terrible moments, sparkle with potential for happiness and fulfillment.